

VZCZCXYZ0048  
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHDM #0874/01 3391716  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 041716Z DEC 08  
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5668  
INFO RUEHAM/AMEMBASSY AMMAN PRIORITY 7466  
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD PRIORITY 0967  
RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO PRIORITY 3772  
RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME PRIORITY 0918  
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 0657  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0491  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000874

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA, NEA/I, PRM/ANE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/04/2018

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREF](#) [PGOV](#) [IZ](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: MORE WFP RICE TO BE RE-EXPORTED: SARG PROXIES  
BLAME WFP

REF: A. DAMASCUS 820  
[1](#)B. DAMASCUS 792  
[1](#)C. DAMASCUS 857

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.5 b and d.

[1](#)1. Summary: The World Food Program (WFP) reported to us its plans to re-export the Vietnamese rice, destined for the Iraqi refugee population, in accordance with Syrian demands. This comes after several weeks of WFP working to find a solution to a SARG decision to refuse import. A close associate of the Syrian government, Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) President Attar, blamed WFP for the situation. Among other complaints, Attar suggested WFP's attempt to involve the Deputy Prime Minister in the matter, in essence going around the Minister of Finance, only served to solidify the SARG decision to refuse entry. For their part, WFP is hoping to move beyond this incident and work more closely with interested parties in the government in an effort to insure that future shipments and/or WFP programs do not experience similar problems. One possible alternative to WFP food shipments, a voucher system for the refugees, does not have the support of the SARC according to Attar. While Attar suggested that the proposed WFP system is far too high-tech to be workable in Syria other interlocutors reported that the SARC and the Ministry of Syrian Arab Red Crescent Affairs are pushing back on the scheme in order to preserve their piece of the Iraqi refugee pie. End Summary.

-----  
Vietnamese Rice to Be Re-Exported  
-----

[1](#)2. (SBU) Officer-in-Charge WFP Syria Muhannad Hadi reported to us his organization will re-export the Vietnamese rice (purchased with funds donated by the Italian government) currently embargoed at the port of Latakia (ref A & B), despite WFP's best efforts to convince the Syrian government to allow its entry. During the December 3 meeting he added that both the Indian rice (purchased with donations from PRM) and Vietnamese rice will be re-exported to their respective countries of origin. WFP is returning the rice to the countries of origin to avoid having to secure letters from receiving countries of re-exported goods, not the country of origin, as required by Syrian law.

-----  
What Happened?  
-----

13. (C) Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) President Dr. Abdul Rahman Attar suggested WFP had "mishandled" the situation in a December 4 with Charge. Attar was quick to lay blame at the feet of former WFP Syria Representative Pippa Bradford (ref C) and her staff, saying Bradford's effort to involve Deputy Prime Minister Dardari in the matter only solidified the Minister of Finance's position not to allow for the entry of the rice. Attar added that Bradford did not understand Syrian bureaucracy and had failed to coordinate with SARC on food imports, purchased poor quality goods, and had the "wrong" people working for her organization at the port. Attar reported that he called on VFM Miqdad in order to help find a solution to the crisis, but Miqdad was told by the Minister of Finance the issue had grown "too big" and the MFA could not resolve it. Attar noted that as a result of his own intervention the Syrian government had waived a ten percent tax usually levied on re-exported goods.

-----  
The Way Forward  
-----

14. (C) Asked how best to proceed after in the wake of this incident, Attar replied WFP should coordinate more with the appropriate parties, follow Syrian import guidelines/standards, and suggested that WFP purchase the rice through the government which can buy the rice on the commodities market. He also suggested that food distribution should occur more frequently as the refugees were receiving far too many goods at one time (two months worth of food stocks per refugee) and that the refugees were selling the goods on the black market. Importers and merchants angered

by a flood of cheap black market refugee rice may have contributed to the recent WFP rice import problem, Attar argued. For WFP's part, Hadi said his organization is attempting to establish a new working relationship with the SARG in the hopes of avoiding future incidents. Hadi expects to sit down with the SARG sometime in January to hammer out an agreement on what the SARG expects from the WFP in terms of importing goods (more detailed notification, samples of the commodities presented to the SARG ahead of importing, etc.). Hadi said WFP would also seek SARG buy-in on other options (vouchers, local procurement, cash, etc.) before proceeding with any program.

-----  
Vouchers?  
-----

15. (C) On the possibility of a voucher scheme for the refugees, Hadi noted that the voucher system is a medium to long-term solution and could not be of use in dealing with the immediate situation. He added there were those who did not support the voucher system, including the Minister of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent Affairs, and therefore the project may never get off the ground. In a separate meeting, UNHCR Deputy Representative Leclerc confirmed that there were elements in the government who were firmly against the voucher system, including the Minister of Syrian Arab Red Crescent Affairs - who reportedly believes the voucher scheme would serve to diminish his ministry's involvement in the Iraqi refugee file. Bradford pushed hard for this system, to the ire of some in the government, which may have ultimately contributed to her removal, according to Leclerc. Supporting Leclerc's theory, SARC President Dr. Attar stated that he was against the voucher system, complaining that Bradford had sought the support of the Ministry of Economy without any consultation with the SARC and the Ministry of SARC Affairs. He also noted that the system WFP had put forward was far too high-tech and overly complicated, and therefore would fail.

16. (C) Comment: Unfortunately, the UN's release of the 2009 appeal for Iraqi refugee assistance comes on the heels of roughly \$12 million in rice donations being refused by the Syrian government. This move on the part of SARG is not likely to play well in the capitals of perspective donor

countries, making the task of raising critical aid for the Iraqi refugee population all the more difficult in the coming months.

CONNELLY